The Best Speech I Ever Heard

By CHAUNCEY M. DEPEW.

Robert Ingersoll

THE best speech I ever heard, for power and effectiveness, was delivered by Wendell Phillips in 1855 or 1856, when I was at Yale. Phillips at that time was the leader of the anti-slavery movement in Boston and was considered one of the greatest minds in New England.

His subject was slavery. The auditorium, Brewster's Hall in New Haven, was jammed and the audience of about 2,500 persons, mostly New Haven folk, was intensely hostile. Before he finished Phillips had captured them all.

The city of New Haven on account of its manufactures was violently pro-slave. When Phillips arose such a booing and hissing started that for ten minutes he could not make himself heard. For almost an hour he was interrupted constantly with hisses and catcalls, but finally his eloquence prevailed and the audience was laughing, crying or applauding as Phillips willed.

The effect of the speech was best illustrated in its reaction on a classmate of mine who had gone with me at my request to hear Phillips. This young man came from Louisiana and was himself a large slaveholder. Of course, he detested Phillips. He said before the meeting he was going only to jeer at him.

He thoroughly hated the principle Phillips was defending, and yet from the hostile demonstration, in which my friend joined, he ended by applauding the orator with unrestrained enthusiasm. After the meeting the young man spent some hours in my room upbraiding himself for having been weak enough to have been carried away by Phillips's eloquence.

At that time the country was very much excited about the case of Anthony Burns. Burns was a runaway slave who had escaped to Boston, where he had been taken up by philanthropic abolitionists of the Phillips school.

They had given him their protection and had educated him. He proved to be a man of a great deal of ability. He was prospering in business, had married well and was living with his wife and children in a comfortable home near Boston which he owned.

Then, when Burns thought his freedom was secure, his owner discovered him and under the fugitive slave law got an order from the United States Court to deliver him up. The matter caused a tremendous stir. The people of Boston rioted about it, so that Anthony Burns, after his arrest by a United States Marshal, had to be escorted to the warship on which he was to be sent South into slavery again by a troop of United States cavalry.

Phillips's description of the man's escape from servitude, his education, his rise, his industrial success, his home, his family and of his being torn away by the law to be returned to slavery was so affecting that the whole audience was in tears. His denunciation of the conditions that made such a thing possible was so eloquent that the hostile crowd forgot its prejudice and lost sight of the fact that the victim of the law was a negro. They grasped the truth that he was a man like themselves.

Most surprising of all, although they were all redhot constitutionalists, they applauded wildly Phillips's dramatic appeal to heaven when he said:

"God damn a constitution if it can commit a crime like this against humanity and liberty!"

That was the greatest speech I have ever heard before or since. It was the only one I ever heard that captured and converted a hostile audience. Its effect eventually was the repeal of the fugitive slave law and indirectly the election of Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States.

I have heard Henry Ward Beecher deliver some of his most effective speeches in which he aroused his auditors to an excitement bordering on insanity, but they were addressed to friendly audiences. One in particular I remember in which Beecher spoke for the freedom of Ireland. The hall was packed with Irishmen, and before he finished they almost tore down the walls in the frenzy of their enthusiasm.

Throughout my term in the United States Senate I do not remember a single great speech. I heard a great many good speeches, but no great ones. The most effective nominating speech at a national political convention I ever heard was the famous "Plumed Knight" speech of Col. Robert G. Ingersoll in which he proposed James G. Blaine for President in 1876.

The convention was held in Cincinnati. Its preliminary acts showed no especial tendency toward sentiment, but when Col. Ingersoll rose to name Mr. Blaine a great shout went up. During his speech he was interrupted constantly by applause.

In his peroration Col. Ingersoll said:

"Our country, crowned with the vast and marvellous achievements of its first century, asks for a man worthy of its past, prophetic of its future—asks for a man who has the audacity of genius—asks for a man who is the grandest combination of heart, conscience and brains beneath the flag. That man is James G. Blaine.

"For the Republican host, led by that intrepid man, there can be no defeat. This is a grand year—a year filled with the recollections of the Revolution; filled with proud and tender memories of the sacred past; filled with the legends of liberty; a year in which the sons of freedom will drink from the fountains of enthusiasm; a year in which the people call for a man who has preserved in Congress what our soldiers won upon the field; a year in which we call for the man that has torn from the throat of treason the tongue of slander; a man that has snatched the mask of democracy from the hideous face of rebellion; a man who, like an intellectual athlete, stood in the arena of debate, challenged all comers, and who up to this moment is a total stranger to defeat.

"Like an armed warrior, like a plumed knight, James G. Blaine marched down the halls of the American Congress and threw his shining lances full and fair against the brazen forehead of every defamer of his country and maligner of his honor.

"For the Republican party to desert that man now is worse than if an army should desert their general on the field of battle. James G. Blaine is now and has been for years the bearer of the sacred standard of the Republic. I call it sacred because no human being can stand beneath its folds without becoming and without remaining free.

"Gentlemen of the Convention, in the name of the great Republic—the only Republic that ever existed upon this earth—in the name of all her defenders and all her supporters; in the name of all her soldiers living, in the name of all her soldiers who died upon the field of battle, and in the name of those that perished in the skeleton clutch of famine at Andersonville and Libby—whose sufferings he so eloquently remembers—Illinois nominates for the next President of this country that prince of parliamentarians, that leader of leaders, James G. Blaine."

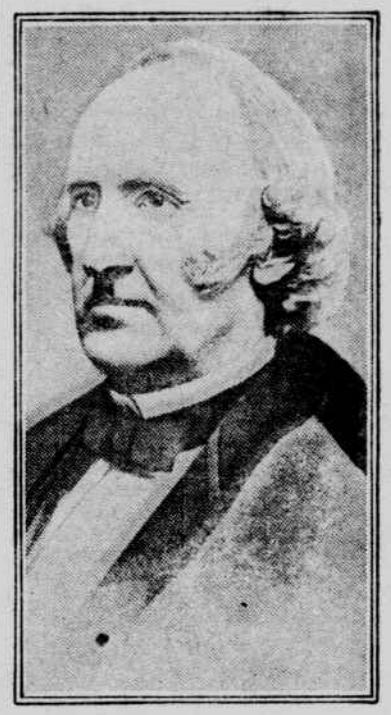
In spite of Col. Ingersoll's great speech the nomination went to Rutherford B. Hayes, who was elected. Blaine was nominated in 1884 and was defeated by Grover Cleveland.

I have heard Lincoln speak, but he did not have the oratorical gift of arousing emotion possessed by Ingersoll and Wendell Phillips. Lincoln's speeches were deliberate and logical.

There is no man in public life to-day that I know whom I can compare with some of the speakers of the last century. That does not mean, however, that I think the day of great orators is past. Give a man the ability to sway his hearers and human nature will be the same in 1922 as it was fifty years ago.

Of my own speeches—and I have made 1,000 or more—there are four that I remember with the most pleasure.

The first was in 1880 at the dedication in Tarrytown of a monument to Major Andre, the British officer who was executed for his part in the treason of Benedict Arnold. The second was at the unveiling of the Bartholdi Statue of Liberty in New York Bay in 1886. The third was at the centennial of the inauguration of General Washington as first President of the United States in front of the Sub-Treasury in Wall street in 1889, and the fourth was at the opening of the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893.



Wendell Phillips

A Flutter of Fans

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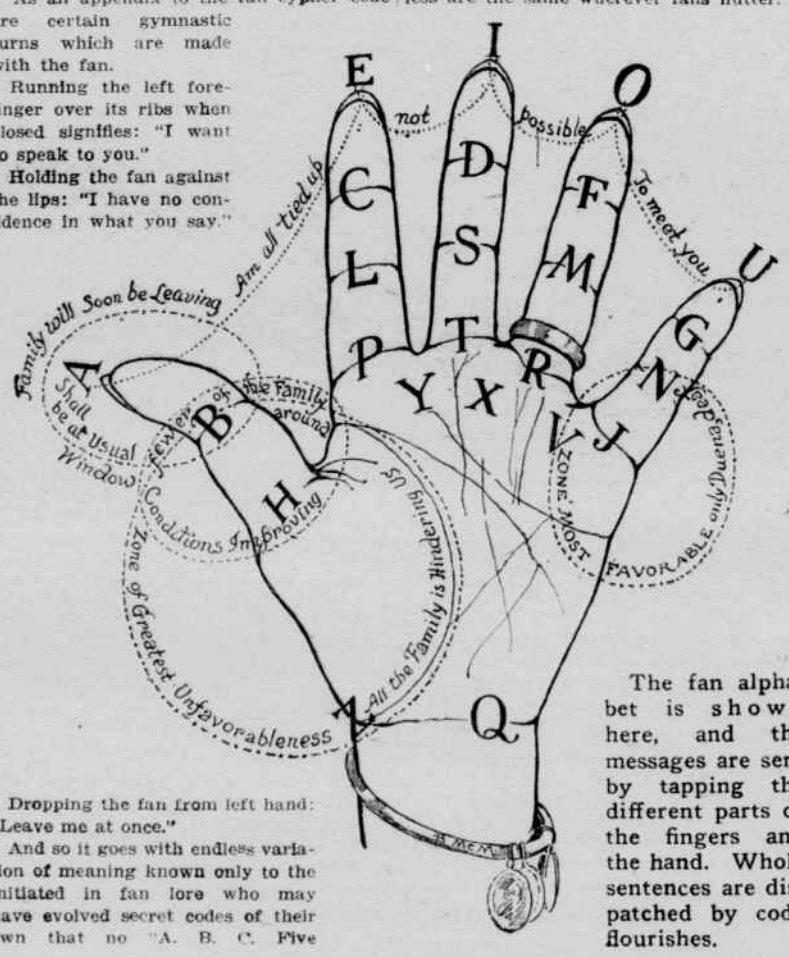
designed on the plan of the wings of a bird. Yes it is! The bird preens its wings before flight and the senorita preens her fan for flights of fancy! There's always a happy ending to be had; no wonder that editors demand it and the public like it.

As an appendix to the fan cypher code are certain gymnastic turns which are made with the fan.

Running the left forefinger over its ribs when closed signifies: "I want to speak to you."

Holding the fan against the lips: "I have no confidence in what you say."



Dropping the fan from left hand: "Leave me at once."

And so it goes with endless variation of meaning known only to the initiated in fan lore who may have evolved secret codes of their own that no "A. B. C. Five Letter, Fifth Edition" may unravel.

Fan codes vary somewhat in their applications according to regions. That practiced in Seville differs from that used in Toledo. Society of Madrid has interpolations that one does not find in Cordoba. But the fundamentals of the shorthand dictionary of the Spanish fan wireless are the same wherever fans flutter.

The fan alphabet is shown here, and the messages are sent by tapping the different parts of the fingers and the hand. Whole sentences are dispatched by code flourishes.

Borneo's Venice

THE city of Brunei, a couple of miles up the river of that name on the island of Borneo, known as the Venice of the East to dwellers in that land, but known not at all in the outside world, is one of the world's unique cities. It is built entirely on piles placed over the river, and stretches for a couple of miles on each side of the river. It is really a lot of little towns in one, with a population of 10,000, mostly Malays.

The respective trades are segregated each to an area of their own; thus you go to one part of the town to see the fishermen, another to see the metal workers and the merchants. Streets of bamboo intersect the rows of dwellings. Upon the verandas children entirely naked play or fish or dive into the river below. Children here are expert swimmers by the time they are four years old.

The city market is the only one of its kind in the world, for all marketing is done in boats on a certain portion of the river set aside for the purpose. Here daily the people of the town meet the people from the jungle and exchange manufactured goods for fruit, vegetables and game.